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Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in Arunachal Pradesh: Buttressing the Claims

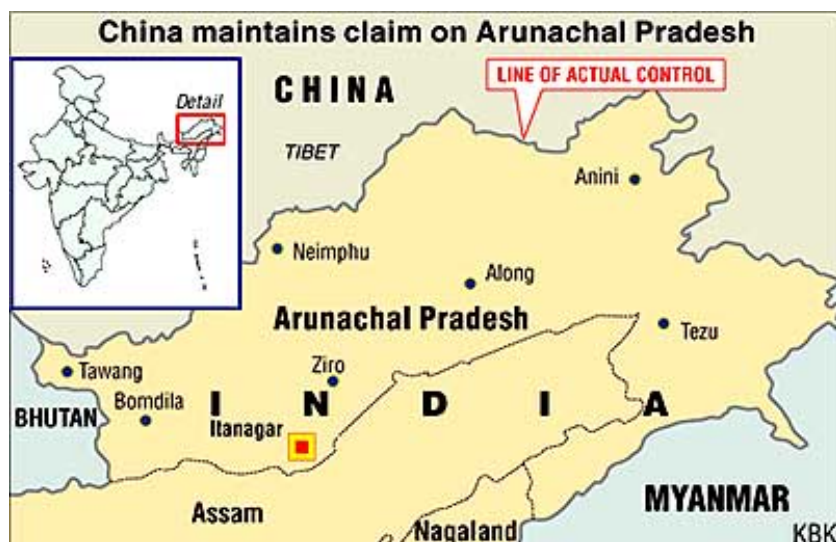
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In territorial disputes, it is said that possession is the third fourth of the claim. Dr Manmohan Singh's visit to Arunachal Pradesh, where India's claims are disputed by China, within two weeks of his state visit to China was obviously a move to reinforce and reassert that the area belongs to India.

This assertion had three pronged manifestation. First, Dr Singh loudly and clearly proclaimed that Arunachal Pradesh is an integral part of India. He said, "Arunachal Pradesh is our land of rising sun... I sincerely hope that, like the sun, Arunachal Pradesh will rise from the east as a new star and become one of the best regions of our country." Secondly, he visited the men in uniform posted on the border with China in the area at Lohitpur to boost their morale by praising them as guardians of "long-term peace in the region." He announced an allocation of nearly Rs1 crore to improve facilities at the army transit camp and provide for satellite phones there. The implied message perhaps was that the area will be held, if need be, by the use of force.

Thirdly, he announced several projects worth Rs4,000 crores to boost connectivity of the region with the rest of India, stimulate its developmental activity and integrate it more closely with the fast growing economy of the country. These projects, the Prime Minister said, "will contribute to the economic development of the state and create new employment opportunities for the youth of Arunachal Pradesh." He further added that, "it is only through these measures and through the all round development of Arunachal Pradesh can we ensure that the nation moves ahead in step towards a glorious future." The thrust of these projects is on building infrastructure in the areas of power, and rail, road and air links. An interesting component of these infrastructure projects is the proposed daily helicopter link between Guwahati and Tawang. The Buddhist monastery in Tawang, having built in 1681 by the then Tibetan Lama Lodre Gyatso on the command of the fifth Dalai Lama Nagwang Lobsang Gyatso, claims its cultural lineage from Tibet. Chinese claims on Tawang are based on this lineage.

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A number of considerations could have been behind Dr Singh's move to undertake this visit to Arunachal Pradesh. There has been a lack of progress in Sino-Indian border negotiations. During his visit to China, his hosts refused to exchange their version of maps of the boundary and the draft note prepared by them on disputed area and proposed accommodations, reiterated their own claims on Arunachal Pradesh, particularly Tawang. There have been several instances of the Chinese troops encroaching in the Arunachal Pradesh region besides elsewhere along the border. The Indian army has been raising the question of such encroachments and there have been allegations that the Indian prime minister, in view of the burgeoning bilateral trade and economic relations, was soft on China in this regard. This visit was to send a message that the Indian establishment was not soft on sensitive aspects of border issue. This was also evident in the strong statements of External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherji on 16 June 2007 and the Defence Minister A. K. Anthony on 18 June 2007. Allegations of softness towards China were also leveled by the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that the prime minister was under pressures from the Left in his approach to China. The BJP Member of Parliament from Arunachal Pradesh, Mr Khiren Rijjiu, voiced these charges even during Prime Minister Singh's visit to Arunachal Pradesh. He said that the Chinese were pursuing an aggressive stance in this region and through repeated encroachments, have taken some of its territory from the Taksin area. Prime Minister Singh's visit was in response to these pressures both from within as well as outside the government.

While sending strong messages to the Chinese as well as internal distracters, the visit can also be seen as a much needed step towards stimulating developmental process in not only Arunachal Pradesh but the whole of northeastern region. The inclusion of Mr Mani Shankar Aiyar, the Minister for Northeastern Affairs, in the Prime Minister's delegation was important. Developing the northeastern region and linking it to India's "Look East" policy has been vigorously argued by Mr Aiyar. There is huge hydro-power potential, based on the run of the river projects in this region which has remained neglected for decades. Prime Minister Singh promised to his audiences in Arunachal that by developing micro-hydropower projects, along with the use of solar power and grid based power, all the villages of the region can be electrified within a period of two years. He also pointed out that, "Our government has given the highest priority to the development on the north eastern region, including Arunachal Pradesh." He has been acutely aware of the fact that territorial claims cannot be sustained if there is even a slightest degree of disaffection among the people living in the border/disputed areas.

During the past couple of years, the Chinese have been asserting their claims on Arunachal Pradesh in a rather aggressive manner. On the eve of the Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to India in November 2006, the Chinese Ambassador in New Delhi, Mr Sun Yuxi, had publicly announced that the whole of the Arunachal state belonged to China, not just the Tawang. In April-May 2007, the Chinese authorities had refused to grant a visa to an Indian Administrative Service officer for his China visit under the pretext that since the area belonged to China, no visa was required by the people living there as they were going to their own country. In view of this position, it was rather surprising that Dr Manmohan Singh's visit to Arunachal Pradesh did not evoke any reaction from China at least for the first week of the visit. The on-setting of the Chinese new year festivities is not an adequate reason to explain this lack of reaction from the Chinese side. The academics working in China's government funded think tanks such as the China Institute for Contemporary International Relations and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences did not take an exception to this visit and indicated that this would harm the smooth development in Sino-Indian bilateral relations. However, after more than a week, the Chinese officials did protest against the Prime Minister's visit to Arunachal Pradesh. Taking exception to Dr Singh's description of Arunachal Pradesh as "our land of rising sun", the Chinese said that it was 'not proper' to make such statements at a time when the two countries were engaged in talks over the boundary question. The Chinese objection was strongly rebutted by Foreign Minister Mukherji on 8 February 2008 when he stated that "Arunachal Pradesh is an integral part of our country...we have elected members in our parliament from Arunachal Pradesh... and therefore...it is quite obvious that prime minister will visit any part of the country." The foreign minister's reaction to a lowly Chinese official and his, what can be called as a mild 'performa' reaction, was advisedly tailored to administer a strong rebuff.

The contrast in the latest Chinese objections to their earlier position on Arunachal Pradesh is a clear indication that the Chinese have softened unless there is a stronger reaction in the offing still. The Chinese have relented even on the question of issuing visas to people from Arunachal Pradesh. Is this an indication that China is gradually shifting towards 'accommodating' India's claims, as it earlier did on the question of Sikkim? One may recall here that during Mao's times, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh (then called North East Frontier Agency), along with Nepal and Bhutan, were considered as fingers of the Chinese palm, Tibet. This is no longer the Chinese position on Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim. Perhaps, their position on Arunachal Pradesh is also falling in this line. May be, the earlier stronger position of China was to test the strength of India's commitment to Arunachal Pradesh. This shift in the Chinese position, if true, may be in conformity with the 11 April 2005 Agreement on the "Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question" which in its Article VII says that, "In reaching a boundary settlement, the two sides shall safeguard due interests of their settled population in border areas". Even Article V underlines "national sentiments, practical difficulties and reasonable concerns and sensitivities of both sides and the actual state of border areas", while referring to "historical evidence".

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